NARRATIVE STRATEGIES: THE AUDITORY CHANNEL IN *HAMLET* FILMS

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Film music is like a small lamp placed under the screen to warm it.

Aaron Copland

Within a bit more than a hundred-year long period of the existence of film as a medium, film music has changed from a means of covering the noises of the clicky projector and smoothing transitions between disjointed camera shots into an integral part of the cinematic texture.

Each filmmaker exploits different strategies, techniques and codes in order to capture his audience's attention, to implement his vision of the same literature work as well as to recreate the cultural and historical contexts in which he produces his film version. But despite all the varieties of means at his hand, any filmmaker always employs three channels characteristic to any filmic narrative: verbal, visual and auditory channels.

A more traditional approach is to subdivide the film channels into two groups: audio and visual, but as my reflections are based on film adaptations of classical drama the main domain of which is the text, I additionally introduce the verbal channel as a tool with the help of which a filmmaker treats the original text, cutting it, modifying and rearranging scenes.

The visual channel deals with a congruence of image and concept applying such film strategies as photography, camera movement, editing (montage), mise-en-scene as well as lighting, colour, setting, costume and make-up design.

The auditory channel (I prefer the term 'auditory' to 'audio' as it is an archaic word

for 'audience' and 'auditorium' that emphasizes its focus on the spectatorship) comprises not only music, a special feature of this article, but also various sound/silence effects and speech-acts.

Though nowadays it is an accepted fact that film is a synthetic art, "that film music has . . . played a strictly subordinate role to other aspects of production inevitably results in its being overlooked (and often entirely ignored) by scholars developing aesthetic theories for the film medium." (Cooke, 2001: 807) Moreover, till now there has not been clear or consistent principle or set of principles on the basis of which the taxonomy of its functions is constructed.

Taking into consideration the absence of any thorough classification, I would like to illustrate the main functions of film music on the basis of Aaron Copland's version suggested by him in an article in *The New York Times* of November 6, 1949 and discussed by Roy M. Prendergart in his book *Film Music: A Neglected Art - A Critical Study of Music in Films* (1992: 213-45). I take this classification to a certain extent randomly and at the same time for its conciseness. According to them, the main functions of music are: to evoke time and place (in other words, to achieve colour which not intrusive but highly flexible and can be readily understood by a musically unsophisticated film audience), to create psychological refinements (music can frequently imply a psychological element far better than a dialogue can), to provide a neutral background filler (to fill the empty spots between pauses in a conversation), to build continuity (to hold the montage together with some sort of unifying musical idea), to provide theatrical buildup (it evokes a gut reaction).

I would like to complement Copland/Prendergart's classification with some other

important functions performed by film music: it can demonstrate a filmmaker's attitude to a certain character or event, become a direct participant of the action, personify and communicate the main conflict of the work, intensify the dramatic development, create a dramatic pause, accelerate or slow down the action, serve as a means of the development of a parallel event, underscore a sharp turn in the plot development (Корганов, Фролов, 1964: 120-75) as well as represent visual space and imaginary time, shape the viewer's perception of a character, reflect a character's memories, fantasies, dreams, hallucinations, feelings, will acts, give a subjective commentary, emphasize space and movement, foreshadow coming events to be shown in the next shots, motivate the further development of the action, inform instead of the visual channel, function as a symbol and, unfortunately (or fortunately), strengthen the impact of scenes that are dramatically weak (Лисса, 1970: 133-256).

In some original scores drawing on the so-called classical model the leitmotif plays an important role. Being a clear musical pattern, it works simultaneously with the image or substitutes it. To make it a real leitmotif it is necessary to establish a link between a certain character and a melody from a character’s first appearance and further this established associative link conditions the audience emotionally for the intervention, arrival, or actions of a particular character. The use of a sound motif can help to shape a story that requires many characters and many locations, to unify the film and to sustain its narrative and thematic development. In addition to the use of leitmotifs ("thematic score"), very often composers exploit some specific timbre codes of musical instruments: for instance, the oboes create a pastoral atmosphere, the winds - heroic, the organ - religious, the violin - lyric or nostalgic.

Another integral aspect of the auditory channel is constituted by noises, which contribute to the weaving of the cinematic discourse (a more precise term is "sound effects" as noises arrive at random, but sound effects are carefully chosen or created by a filmmaker). Primary sound effects are environmental, contributing to the realism of film, but they also can bear meaning in film. They can engage the audience in a moment of suspense just before or during the climax. As Giannetti (1982: 175-6) points out, "off-screen sounds bring off-screen space into play: the sound expands the image beyond the confines of the frame"; "sound effects can also serve symbolic functions which are usually determined by the drama context." They reinforce movements of objects and reveal emotions, thoughts and images existing only in a character's mind. The transposition of temporary noises to musical structures (in other words, their stylization) enables to flow their inner development according to musical principles what can result in functioning sound effects as leitmotifs.

The last but not least device utilized by the auditory channel is silence which is not just an absence of sound but creates an "eerie vacuum - a sense of something impending, about to burst." (Giannetti, 1982: 177) Silence also concentrates the action and slows down time, underlines the speech, serving as cinematic punctuation.

I would like to base my analysis on two *Hamlet* films produced by Laurence Olivier (GB, 1948) and Kenneth Branagh (GB, 1996). Both filmmakers are significant for the rebirth of Shakespearian heritage, starred in the leading role, their *Hamlets* are not their first films made in collaboration with the same composers who created the original scores for the films under consideration. The fact that they grew up in the same country, though in different periods of its history, to certain extent, shaped their interpretation of

the play as well as affected their choice of verbal, visual and auditory solutions.

The music in Olivier's *Hamlet* displays the tragic nature of Shakespeare's play as well as highlights the preoccupations of his contemporaries. The film was released three years after the final victory in WWII, when the Englishmen realized that the long-waited peace had failed their hopes: the British Empire had collapsed, the "cold" was approaching, the world was facing the danger of the nuclear Apocalypse. The philosophy of existentialism, combined with Freud's psychoanalysis, had established its positions... "To be or not to be" started to sound in a new way: "This is the tragedy of the man who could not make up his mind."

The film begins and finishes with the same scene - Hamlet's funeral: the tragic finale is known from the very beginning, the Prince's and any human being's one. The music of the Prelude is tragic, heroic, pathetic and nostalgic. The melody is intertwined with the waves of a stormy and powerful sea, underlying the communicative power of this natural element, emphasized by a foggy sky. The sea acts as Hamlet's alter ego, becoming the personification of his thoughts and feelings. In this way the filmmaker sets the appropriate mood starting with the opening credits.

Three main characters of Olivier/Walton's tragedy - Hamlet, Ophelia and the Ghost - have their own melodies, the dominant musical instrument and a place in the castle where they sound, revealing the nature of their characters. Hamlet's dominant instrument is the cello; the place is the hall with the empty royal throne. Ophelia's poignant melody is played by the oboes that create a pastoral atmosphere and is heard every time when the camera approaches the arch before the exit to the balcony where Ophelia likes to spend her time. Hamlet's and Ophelia's melodies are introduced by

Olivier within a bit more than one minute immediately after Marcello's words "Something rotten in the state of Denmark" (Shakespeare-I.iv.89; Olivier-I.i), giving a musical characteristics of each character. The Ghost's leitmotif is introduced earlier: the stirring discords combined with a pounding of drums create tension, stylizing the heavy pounding of a nervous heart. Having reached its culmination, the dramatic intensity of the music created by the volume/tempo acceleration suddenly breaks down, and the heart beat is accompanied only by the waves of the sea. Claudius' royal appearance is always announced by the fanfares, but the moments when the King's sick conscience is forced to wake up, affected by relevant dramatic actions, are underscored by string tremolo intertwined with the Ghost's theme. Though it is impossible to define Claudius' musical theme as a leitmotif.

In the course of the narration the delicate use of leitmotifs foreshadows the characters' arrival as well as the dynamization and development of the musical themes emphasize the changes in the characters' emotional conditions.

The first polyphonic development of Hamlet's leitmotif is introduced in his first soliloquy "O that this too too solid flesh" (I.ii.). A fugue, whose theme initiated by a cello and combined with the voice-over technique, underscores his heavy thoughts. According to the Baroque musical symbolism a fugue represents the cross, which visually appears before the conversation between Hamlet and the Ghost (I.v). At the same time Hamlet's words uttered by him aloud create an additional leitmotif themselves (nay not so much, not two... and yet within a month... within a month...). Further Olivier rearranges the scenes of the tragedy: Hamlet's soliloquy is immediately followed by the conversation between Ophelia and Laertes (I.iii) that enables the filmmaker to unite Hamlet and

Ophelia musically, introducing their theme of love - a dialogue of the woodwinds accompanied by the strings and harp arpeggios (I.iii). Its intonations reappear in the scene in which "mad" Hamlet visits Ophelia (II.i). Hamlet's theme combined with the Ghost's one reappears in the soliloquy "To be or not to be" (III.i), underscored by the waves of the sea, both as natural noises of the tide and depicted in the stylized music. Further Hamlet's theme is present in the King's prayer and in the scene (III.iii) in which the King questions Hamlet where he has hidden Polonius' body, underscoring the conflict between Hamlet and his stepfather.

Ophelia's theme reappears in the Nunnery Scene (III.i) and, repeatedly modulated, emphasizes her tension and insecurity. Her leitmotif undergoes an interesting treatment in the scene IV.v where the mad Ophelia leaves the hall and only the accompaniment to her melody sounds as if her melody had died before her own death. At the same time this modified leitmotif makes a smooth transition to the next scene (IV.vii), rearranged by Olivier, in which this wretched creature commits suicide.

The Ghost's leitmotif sounds in the scene (I.iv) and in the Closet Scene (III.iv) in which the Ghost's musical theme substitutes his visual image.

As it was mentioned above, Olivier also uses the leitmotifs for foreshadowing the characters' appearance; for instance: Ophelia's before the Nunnery Scene (III.i), Hamlet's when the King starts to pray (III.iii) as well as he goes to his Mother's closet (III.iii), the Ghost's in the Closet Scene (III.iii).

The Elizabethan stylized music plays an illustrative role (during the King's feast (I.iv), the actors' arrival (II.ii), in the Mousetrap (III.ii) and the Duel Scene (V.ii)), establishing the authentity of the Shakespearian period. Though in the Mousetrap (III.ii)

it gradually starts to function as a dramatic element, intertwining with the Ghost's theme and thus conveying the tension and revealing the murderer' s crime.

In this film version silence effects are an essential component of the narration. Walton uses the same pattern to build up a suspense: both the volume and the tempo of music accelerate, followed by a sharp silence (during the Guards' change (I.i), at the moment when Hamlet decides against killing the King (III.iii) as well as all the Ghost's appearances follow the same pattern (I.i, I.iv, III.iii).

Branagh/Doyle's approach is quite different, but before making the analysis of the score, it is important to understand the general situation of the 1990s which undeniably affected Branagh and Doyle’s production.

> The tone and style of public life, perhaps more than the substance of policy, added to a mood of disillusion and cynicism in the mid-1990s. . . . An obscure word, 'sleaze', dominated public perceptions of political life. . . . Even in an age of moral permissiveness, such behaviour was held to be politically unacceptable. It was especially so for a party which had unwisely proclaimed its attachment to 'family values' and its urge moralistically to 'go back to basics', a phrase in whose very ambiguity perils lurked. Worse still, a growing range of covert links between business and finance and Tory politicians appeared to suggest a deep rot of corruption in Westminster. . . . It was also fuelled by private royal family troubles. (Morgan, 1999: 665)

Maybe this historical background can serve as an explanation of the fact why Branagh, being faithful to the original text, placed the action in the Palace of Bleinheim designed in the Baroque style: beauty, luxury and festivity combined with crime, corruption and lust. However, Branagh himself (1) comments upon his choice of the setting in the following way: "We wanted to do something that was a little close to our

own century and yet also was a world in which you could believe that people spoke in a slightly different way."

Branagh prefers not to start the film with traditional opening credits and introduces the title of the film as an inscription on the monument to the Old Hamlet. The opening scene of Branagh's *Hamlet* is not underscored by music and the mysterious and slightly terrifying mood is established by sound effects: bell tolling, birds' screeching and the wind, Hamlet's element, howling. The close-up of the monument's iron hand producing a harsh sound strengthens the thrilling effect of the scene.

Unlike Olivier and Walton, Branagh and Doyle introduce the musical themes of their main characters at different moments with big intervals in the narration. Hamlet's gentle, noble, hymn-like theme played on strings is introduced during the royal wedding (I.ii), when his mother tries to comfort him in his sorrow "All that lives must die". His melody tinged with both a sense of mystery and reverence, an almost religious feeling appears later sporadically thought out the score. For instance, during the conversation between Ophelia and Polonius (II.i), underscoring Hamlet and Ophelia's affectionate making love presented in flashbacks and during Hamlet's soliloquy "I have of late" (II.ii), emphasizing his nostalgic skepticism. "Good night sweet prince" (V.ii) contains a beautiful, heartfelt rendition of Hamlet's Theme, a gorgeous trumpet solo, played, as the young prince lies dying after his fight.

Ophelia's theme, a simple, not easily remembered, sad violin piece is introduced only after the Nunnery Scene (III.i) in her soliloquy "Oh what a noble mind". It reappears in her mad a cappella singing (IV.v) when her split heart and soul is losing the last connections with this "double-mirror" world.

Claudius' theme, creepy and intense, is heard for the first time during Hamlet's soliloquy "Tis now the very witching time of night" (III.ii) on his words "Now could I drink hot blood." It is a bold and dramatic statement with a frightening undertone, played on brass and string combined with the visual presentation of the King's so-called "prayer". But these are never clearly evident and further renditions are difficult to spot.

The Ghost's first appearance (I.i) is accompanied by a combination of male voices, which sound like wounded, and stirring discords that create a heart touching, terrifying and thrilling effect, sympathizing to the tragic destiny of the murdered King. In Act I, Scene IV the Ghost's music is exciting and tense, full of pounding percussion and a dramatic string section. Starting with a terse action motif, it then moves from eerie strings, subtly suggesting Hamlet's theme through to a warmer statement of the theme, but rounded out by a quite exciting and percussive finale.

Still there is no clear leitmotif system in Doyle's score, and the music plays more the role of an emotional background to the events and functions as an attribute of the main characters.

Sound effects underscore Branagh/Doyle's ideas of a spying atmosphere and the characters' alienation. For instance, the sound of the closing door which precedes Hamlet's soliloquy "O that this too too solid flesh" (I.ii.) functions not as a transition but a sharp division between the two scenes symbolizing two different worlds. The same function is performed by a similar sound in the scene (I.iii) in which Polonius warns Ophelia in the family chapel about princes' love habits: the door separates the world of her pure hopes and her father's pragmatic world. The echo of Hamlet's steps in the empty royal hall preceding his soliloquy "To be or not to be" (III.i) builds up an extra-suspense.

Ophelia's inhuman yell (III.iii), that accompanies the delivery of Polonius' dead body and continues to sound against the view of the lake where later (IV.vii) Ophelia will drawn herself, causes not only a very impressive immediate gut reaction but also foreshadows her future madness and creates a musical landscape.

In February 1997 the members of the Shakespearian Electronic Conference (2) widely (and wildly) discussed Doyle's score, bitterly criticizing it for "going for volume over intimacy", being "bathetic" and "overbearing, masking the important events of the film." The most attacked place of the film was Hamlet's "How All Occasions" speech (IV.iv). It is an upsetting fact that some participants of the discussion based their evaluations solely on their impressions after listening the CD with Doyle's music without watching the film itself.

Definitely on the one hand, the filmmakers can be accused of not knowing elementary technical principles of sound recording: when the actor's voice is supposed to be well heard and the audience's attention to be focused on the text, the score must be transparent, being created without the middle register as this particular frequency is the domain of a human voice. Moreover, in static shots music is heard better and the viewer becomes not the "camera-eye" but the "microphone-ear". The counterargument may be conditioned by the filmmaker's target: to create the atmosphere of exaggeration on all the levels of film communication. This idea is conveyed by: the ambitious undertaking to present the whole text; the choice of the setting destroying the audience's traditional idea of Shakespeare's locale; the manner of the actors' articulation (particularly in Branagh's case who uses the words like daggers); the visual solution (in this particular soliloquy the camera - a crane shot - pulls back slowly to reveal a martial panorama turning Hamlet

into a small object dissolved in the world of ice and estrangement); and finally the music which, while Hamlet is reflecting on Fortinbras' invisible army and his own indecisiveness, is questioning, arguing, oppressing, encouraging and demanding him take a final decision. The music of emotion via the music of thought becomes the music of action.

Even this brief analysis demonstrates that Olivier/Walton and Branagh/Doyle apply different approaches to the auditory channel in their films. The former epitomize the conventions of the classical Hollywood film score popular in the 30-50s, featuring a "leitmotif-based symphonic romanticism with narrative orientation" (Cooke, 2001: 799) where illustrative music is synchronized with specific on-screen activity. The auditory channel in this film version sustains unity, provides smooth transitions between scenes, unites the characters musically, intensifying emotional and moral changes which they undergo, builds up a suspense, creates a dramatic pause, foreshadows the characters' appearance on screen and sometimes substitutes the visual presentation of the character. On the whole, the chamber nature of Walton's music underscores Olivier's Gothic mystery of the family story.

Branagh's Hamlet is an extroverted prince without much depressive pain or existential torment. Likewise, Doyle's music constantly stirs the emotions with ever-growing crescendos and passages of intellectual angst. Having created the 'thematic' score, the film-maker and the composer do not develop its leitmotif structure. Very often the music can be called 'background' but at the same time it creates psychological refinements and participates in the development of the dramatic conflict, even (in the soliloquy "How All Occasions"(IV.iv) that can be considered the culmination of the

tragedy) becoming another character, a true participant of the narration. The auditory channel in Branagh/Doyle's film adds to dramatic tension as well as to its release. The treatment of the auditory channel in this film adaptation is conditioned by the film music conventions of the particular period of time and assists Branagh in constructing his political version which matches the fears of a century of totalitarianism, adding to Shakespeare's unabridged text new conflicts.

There is still an opinion that film music must disappear from the field of its own effects in order to work. It is an absolutely misleading assumption as film is a highly synthetic medium and only the consideration and further analysis of all the three channels - verbal, visual and auditory - in their integrity can provide penetration into the subject matter and offer to the viewer an insight into the film.

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